Of Good Works (WCF 16:1-3)

Of Good Works

1. "Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention." (WCF 16.1)

   a) Matthew 15:1-9 ESV
   "Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God,"

   b) The Pharisees and scribes were more concerned with the washing of hands then obeying the fifth commandment. It's true that the priests were required to wash their hands before entering the temple (Exodus 30:19-2). However, the Pharisees and scribes turned it into a ritual to wash your hands before eating.

   c) Good works are only what God has commanded in his Holy Word.

2) "These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life." (WCF 16.2)

   a) Good works are the fruit of faith which unites us to Jesus Christ. The Reformers wrote that we're justified by faith alone, but this faith is never alone but accompanied by all

Faith + work Justification (legalism) *Faith Justification – works (antinomianism)* *Faith Justification + works (evangelical)*

other saving graces. Those whom God Justifies; He is sanctifying. When I was studying the Westminster Confession of Faith, we were required to watch a video series by John Gerstner, who was the mentor or R. C. Sproul. Gerstner used a diagram to help explain what scripture teaches on justification and good works.

b) Jesus said, John 15:4-5 ESV, *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."*

3) "Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure: yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them." (WCF 16.3)

a) Good works are the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification. The debate amongst Reformed Theologians is whether this work is modernistic (one working) or synergistic (two working). The WCF says that this "*ability to do good works is not of themselves, but are wholly from the Spirit of Christ"* Yet, this does not mean that we're passive. One of the heresies of the church that B.B. Warfield wrote against in his Studies in Perfectionism is to *let go and let God*, just get out of the way. However, the WCF says *"yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them."*

b) Louis Berkhof writes in his Systematic Theology*, "Though man is privileged to co-operate with the Spirit of God, he can do this only in virtue of the strength which the Spirit imparts to him from day to day. The spiritual development of man is not a human achievement, but a work of divine grace. Man deserves no credit whatsoever for that which he contributes to it instrumentally."*

c) Philippians 2:12-13 ESV, *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* According to scripture, we're working out what God is working within by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, *"without me you can do nothing."*

The Four States of Man

The moral law is more concisely written in the Ten Commandment, which concern our duties toward God and man. The moral law was given to Adam as a covenant of works by which he and his posterity were bound to perfect and perpetual obedience. The moral law is a *creation ordinance* by which all of mankind is bound to obey.

First State

Adam was promised eternal life upon the fulfilling and threatening death upon his disobedience of it. Augustine's famous quote, *posse peccare, posse non peccare* (able to sin, able not to sin). The Greek word for sin is ἁμαρτία (hamartía) which means *missing the mark.* Adam, pre-fall had the ability to sin and not to sin. Adam was created good but he was still *mutable,* where he could miss the mark. Christ, however, was incarnate where he had a human nature and a divine nature. In His divine nature, Jeus was *immutable,* using our analogy, Christ could not miss the mark. However, in his humanity, he was "*tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15).

This brings us to the debate in Reformed Theology between the *impeccability* and *peccability* of Christ whether Jesus was *unable* to sin (impeccable) or *able* to sin but chose not to (peccable). While both views agree Jesus never sinned, impeccability argues his divine nature made sin impossible, whereas peccability argues his humanity required the *potential* to sin for temptation to be real. The majority view is that Christ was unable to sin (impeccable) because of his divine nature, which was immutable (could not change). However, if Christ could not sin, then how can he be tempted in his human nature? I agree with Derek Thomas who said if Christ could not sin, he didn't know it. In his human nature, Jesus had imitations, Matthew 24:36 ESV, *"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."* And in Luke 2:52 ESV, *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man."*

Second State

After the fall mankind lost the ability to not sin, all we are able to do is sin. Genesis 6:5 ESV, *"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* The apostle Paul writes, Romans 8:7 ESV, "*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot."* The good news is that Jesus Christ fulfilled the covenant of works for those who are united to Him in faith. Jesus said, Matthew 5:17 ESV, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*

> *Romans 3:21-24 ESV, But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Third State

The third state of grace is entered into after our conversion, when we become *posse non peccare* once again. However, these good works are accepted in Jesus Christ. It's only through the mediation of Christ that our good works are acceptable to God. In 1 Peter 2:5 ESV we read, "*you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*"

- Quoted from Pilgrim Covenant Church

Pre-Fall Man	Post-Fall Man	Reborn Man	Glorified Man
able to sin	able to sin	able to sin	able to not sin
able to not sin	unable to not sin	able to not sin	unable to sin

Fourth State

The fourth state is the state of eternity. In that state, in our glorified bodies, we will be *non posse peccare*, "not able to sin." Boston says, "The guilt of sin and the reigning power of it are now taken away in the saints, nevertheless, sin dwells in them (Rom. 7:20), but then, in eternity it shall be no more. The corrupt nature will be quite removed. That root of bitterness will be plucked up and no vestiges of it left in their souls. Their nature shall be altogether pure and sinless. There shall be no darkness in their minds but the understanding of every saint when he has come to this kingdom will be as a globe of pure and unmixed light."

Pastor Tim Posey preached of the already but not yet of the kingdom. That when Christ returns, he will consummate his kingdom. The saints will be raised with glorified bodies that will not sin. Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:48 ESV, *"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* Yet, in the Christian life, we're far from perfect, we still struggle against sin in the third state after our conversion. When we speak of sanctification, most of the time we're referring to the progressive nature of being conformed to the image of Christ. In Romans 8:29 ESV, *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."* If God predestined his adopted children to be *conformed to the image of his Son,* will it not happen. In the mind of God, he already sees his children as perfect in Christ. There is the definitive sanctification by the blood of Christ in the *already but not yet* of the kingdom. The writer of the Hebrews writes of this promise, Hebrews 10:14 ESV, *"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."*

References

Berkhof, L. (n.d.). *Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 535.*

Boston, T. (n.d.). *Monergisim*. Retrieved from Human Nature in Its Fourfold State: https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/four-fold.html

Of Good WorksRon Warren: March 1, 2026
Gerstner, J. (n.d.). *Youtube*. Retrieved from The Westminster Confession of Faith: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLhORVCVz3B2YyeXLs8b0SAtC3OZW7Vokj